

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS



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TO: Montana inmates
FROM: Director Mike Ferriter, Montana Department of Corrections

I have received many calls and letters from family and inmates about the changes in prison policies on personal property. This is my effort to respond to those. For the convenience of family and friends, a copy of this document is available on the department Web site:

<http://cor.state.mt.us>.

Change seldom comes easy. It requires flexibility, understanding and patience to cope with it successfully. But change comes along in every life.

There's a lot of change occurring in Montana's correctional system these days. It affects adult and juvenile offenders, victims, correctional employees and, ultimately, the taxpayers.

Some of these changes will require adjustment for many of the 2,700 inmates in Montana prisons.

Beginning Feb. 1, new policies will affect inmate personal property and canteen products. I realize these changes are unpopular and the source of concern among inmates. I want to assure you the policy changes were adopted neither hastily nor without good reasons. They also were not the product of any single individual, but rather the work of numerous corrections professionals.

They were not created to irritate or inconvenience inmates, but rather to improve the safety and security of the institution for both the inmate population and prison staff.

The changes that have drawn the most attention dictate that personal towels, typewriters, hotpots, musical instruments and fans will no longer be allowed. But that doesn't mean inmates no longer will be able to type documents, heat food and drinks, play guitars or find a fan.

Montana State Prison will provide state-owned towels, microwaves and typewriters in cell blocks and other designated locations. Musical instruments can be played in assigned areas; typewriters can be checked out for an entire day. Access to a typewriter no longer will be dictated by who can afford to own one; everyone will have equal access. As for the fans, during summer months, Montana State Prison can provide box fans in housing units for the cell blocks.

The more personal property in a cell, the more opportunities for violating prison contraband policies. Large amounts of personal property made crowded cells even more confining and makes it difficult to ensure proper searches. While convenience may be affected by these changes, we do not believe that any inmates given access to items in the past will find access denied under the new policy.

The majority of the property policy changes were developed after reviewing the practices used at other correctional facilities across the United States. We looked at the amounts and kinds of personal property allowed, and we found that four cubic feet was typical. But Montana State Prison permitted two and even three times that much, a quantity that made little sense given the small living spaces and the needs of a secure institution.

In developing the new policy, we looked at property considered necessary for inmates, such as hygiene items. Those items are not affected. We reviewed the list of property allowed and the effect that had on the ability of correctional officers to ensure a safe and secure environment for inmates and staff. Officers must be able to conduct cell searches effectively and in a reasonable amount of time. The more property in the cells, the longer the searches take and the greater the likelihood something will be missed. Given the extensive movement of inmates and crowded conditions at the prison, officers cannot afford to devote hours to the search of a single cell.

We needed to get personal property to a manageable level.

The reason for the changes in products available through the prison canteen was the same used by business owners everywhere. It makes sense to put on the shelves what sells. For example, the canteen had offered more than a dozen varieties of potato chips, 16 types of cookies, and similar wide selections of candies and soups. A review determined the items that are most popular and sell best, so the inventory was reduced to the four or five best-sellers for various products.

One of the overriding concerns in adopting the policy changes is the need for consistency among the state's correctional facilities. Inmates moving from one prison to another would find vastly different policies on personal property. It is a matter of equity and fairness that the same policy applies, regardless of the facility in which someone is placed.

In addition, a uniform policy addresses the concerns raised by inmates in numerous lawsuits and grievances. In the end, these changes are a matter of safety, security, fairness and common sense.

Speaking of change, I also want you to be aware that change is occurring on a far larger scale throughout corrections.

Our budget before the Legislature proposes a continually increasing emphasis on programs offering alternatives to prison. These options are based on the belief that all offenders are not the same – they have individual needs that should be addressed with programs and services specific to those needs. In the process of providing these alternatives, we hope to move offenders out of prison in a more timely manner and improve the chances of success once in the community.

The department has proposed:

- Expansion of the work dorm at Montana State Prison to afford more work opportunities for inmates outside the fence.
- Opening a work dorm for inmates at the Montana Women's Prison.
- Giving the Board of Pardons and Parole more flexibility in granting medical parole.
- A sex-offender treatment center that may make it easier for eventual placement of sex offenders in communities.
- A new prerelease center in Northwestern Montana to shorten the wait for openings in such facilities.
- State funding to continue a program that provides re-entry services to juveniles as they move back to communities.
- A new program to provide improved treatment for mentally ill offenders in a more appropriate setting than Montana State Hospital or Montana State Prison.
- Continued funding for a pair of new methamphetamine treatment centers and for a year-old program that diverts from prison offenders who have violated conditions of their community placements.
- Funding for a new program for women offenders that includes an expanded prerelease center, drug treatment, and an assessment and sanction center.
- Creation of more substance-abuse treatment beds
- Funding for chemical dependency counselors to assist offenders on probation or parole.

We have an obligation to provide a secure and safe environment for offenders sent to us by the courts. We have a duty to offer services that give offenders opportunities to improve themselves and their chances for success in the community. We have a responsibility to spend taxpayer money wisely and efficiently.

The changes I have discussed – while sometimes a burden, inconvenient and resisted – are necessary to satisfy those requirements imposed on the Department of Corrections. Progress, like change, never comes easy.

I can only hope that this information helps you understand the reasons behind the policy changes and direction we are going relative to additional programming and opportunities within the department. I also hope that, with your cooperation, the Department of Corrections can achieve better outcomes for all offenders.